



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Cypress
National Preserve

HCR 61, Box 110
Ochopee, Florida 34141

239-695-1107 phone
239-695-3901 fax

Big Cypress Fact Sheet

March 5, 2004

Joint response from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and U. S. National Park Service (NPS)

SUBJECT: Sightings of Florida panthers in the Pinecrest area of Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP).

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and U. S. National Park Service (NPS) share concerns about reports of panthers sighted near Pinecrest and Loop Road Environmental Education Center (LREEC) area and have developed a course of action specific to the Pinecrest panther situation.

BACKGROUND:

Reports of panthers near the Pinecrest and Loop Road Environmental Education Center (LREEC) area began with sightings of a panther family group, a female with two or three kittens, in the fall of 2003, with additional sightings of a single panther on three consecutive days between December 7-9, 2003.

The Big Cypress National Preserve and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission responded by sending staff to the area for field investigation, and concluded that there was not enough evidence to determine whether the sightings were of a known family group of panthers (an adult female with 2-3 kittens) or the family group plus an additional adult panther. Staff provided their contact information in the event that the panthers were again sighted and developed recommendations for minimizing potential conflicts between panthers and people, in part based on the approaches used by Western States.

Nearly two months elapsed before the next sightings of the Pinecrest panther(s), which occurred January 29-31, 2004. These sightings were of a single individual and were reported to both the Big Cypress National Preserve and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Staff returned to Pinecrest on January 31, 2004 observed a panther on Loop Road near the Loop

Road Environmental Education Center, and subsequently determined that this panther was a female. The apparent lack of concern by this panther to the presence of people was not typical behavior for the species, but the frequent presence of panther prey in the area might contribute to the panther's return visits. At no time has the FWC, FWS, or NPS had any indications that the Pinecrest panthers have acted in an aggressive manner.

ACTIONS TAKEN:

- We have identified both short and long-term solutions that we believe will minimize any problems associated with panthers whose home ranges occur along Loop Road.
- The panthers were captured and equipped with radiocollars. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Big Cypress National Preserve provided staff to monitor the area, and the Park Service began its panther capture work in the Loop Road area in February. Because of this monitoring and good fortune, the BCNP capture team was successful in capturing, drawing genetic samples from, and placing radiocollars on a panther family group comprised of an adult female and two 10-month-old kittens, one male and one female. One or more individuals from the captured family group most likely are responsible for the panther sightings along Loop Road.
- The BCNP, FWC, and FWS are educating visitors and residents about living in panther country. These educational efforts have stressed a balanced approach that provides for both public safety and the needs of an endangered species.

GOAL:

Our goal is to make the panthers leave the immediate area and to discourage them from associating with people or areas used by people.

FUTURE ACTIONS:

- The panther family group that was captured and radiocollared in the LREEC area is being intensively monitored to determine their locations, movement patterns, and home range. The FWS, NPS, and FWC concur that if any of the individuals in the family group linger within 100 yards of the LREEC or any residence along Loop Road, dogs or other techniques will be used as a means of aversive conditioning.
- If any of these individuals return and linger after a second treatment of aversive conditioning, the offending panther(s) will be removed. First options for removal could include relocation to other suitable habitat in panther range, including within BCNP, or placement in a captive facility.

- We stress that, under any conditions, if a clear threat to human safety is identified, the offending panther(s) will be removed. Also, we emphasize that, per 50 CFR Part 17.21(c)(2) “... any person may take endangered wildlife in defense of his own life or the lives of others..., and ... Any taking pursuant to paragraph (c)(2) ... of this section must be reported in writing to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Law Enforcement... within 5 days.” However, we advise that any such incidents will be investigated thoroughly.
- FWS, NPS, and FWC will work together to implement modifications to the LREEC grounds to prevent deer and other prey species from congregating. The LREEC and adjacent private residences are situated along an upland ridge vegetated with hardwood hammocks and pinelands. These habitats are attractive to panthers and their prey, particularly during periods of heavy rain when the adjacent wetland habitats carry significant surface water.
- We take this situation very seriously, and we are encouraging residents to do the same by removing any deer and wild hog attractants that, in turn, also may attract panthers. The FWC’s nuisance bear policy and many western state’s cougar policies are built upon the concept of removing attractants as an effective means of managing problem situations, and we believe this approach will work for panthers.
- We have invited the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida’s, an important conservation partner in south Florida, to designate an individual to join our staff in monitoring and tracking the panthers in the Pinecrest area.

Summary:

We believe that the cooperative efforts among the FWC, FWS, and NPS have resulted in the implementation of a sound, comprehensive approach to resolving the current situation between the Pinecrest panthers and the public. Our first priority remains ensuring public safety; however, we have endeavored to enact an approach that ensures human safety while also conserving this highly endangered species.